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## FUTURES OF ACCELERATIONISM

NONPOLITICS ACCELERATION, CAPITALISM, CLASS, CTHULHU CAPITALISM

*FASTER/SLOWER/FUTURE*

*The Road to Post-Capitalism*

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### Introduction

The *Terminator* is, after all, by now probably the most clichéd image for accelerationism and the debate over accelerationism. So, partly due to nostalgia, partly to perversity, I am going to return to it one more time. In particular, away from all the cyborg fantasies and Skynet nightmares (or dreams), I just want to pick up on one thing from this opening text: the final battle for the future is to be fought now, in our present. This, I think, is true. Not only true about the actuality of fighting to determine that future as the world seems to slide inexorably to various forms of barbarism, lacking any seemingly realistic figure of socialism, but also true about the fight over the image of the future as well.

This battle over the image of the future is at the centre of the accelerationism debate. The defining feature of accelerationism, broadly-speaking the demand that we engage with forms of technology and abstraction as the means to reach post-capitalism, has been the claim to the future. The very title of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams's book *Inventing the Future* suggests this, as does all the futuristic and sci-fi imagery that has surrounded accelerationism. The accelerationists claim they are the only ones to offer us a future: all that actually-existing neoliberal capitalism promises is more of the same, and 'there is no alternative' could be written as 'there is no future', except the market stamping on a human face forever; the left is often no better, mired in 'folk politics', driven by nostalgia for social democracy or the face-to-face ideology of small communities resulting in a regression to the past. I, of course, dispute this claim to a monopoly on the future.<sup>1</sup>

Here I want to give a brief history of the term accelerationism, which at least is part of the condition of understanding the debate. Then I want to recap and refine my critique of accelerationism in its dominant forms. My interest, however, lies not so much in

repeating these already fading debates but considering the battle that is being fought over the future in the present. Here I suggest that accelerationism often presents a limited sense of what images are on offer of the future, particularly underestimating the problem of reactionary images of the future. I also want to suggest that framing the problem of the future might allow us to start to consider the stakes of the battle in which 'we', if we are on the left, are in. This is not simply a battle between faster and slower, with faster as good and slower as reactionary, but requires a reconceptualization of these terms.

### A Very Brief History of the Term Accelerationism

I coined the term accelerationism in 2010 (in fact slightly before) when writing my book *The Persistence of the Negative*. I used it to describe what are usually called the 'philosophies of desire': the work of Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, Lyotard in *Libidinal Economy*, and Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, all published in the early 70s and examples of what Alberto Toscano has called '73 thought'. I argued that these works shared a recognition of the new emerging global dominance of capitalism, what tends to get called these days 'real subsumption', and a common or shared response of arguing that the only way out was through, pushing or accelerating the 'deterritorialising' forces of capitalist liquefaction. While this programme is most directly stated in *Anti-Oedipus*, now I think that it is Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* that is really the crucial book. I also argued that in the face of the impasses of this position, which tended to dissolve resistance into capitalism's own deadlocks, all these thinkers turned to more crypto-religious ways out, usually through various invocations of Otherness. I should add since then it has been pointed out to me the term occurs in Roger Zelazny's 1967 novel *Lord of Light*. I remain the first to use it as a critical term to refer to a particular philosophical and political notion.

Then, in 2013, Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek published 'The Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics'. In fact, since 2010, a few signs had emerged on blogs of the adoption, in a positive direction, of accelerationism. The term was now used to refer to the embrace of forms of capitalist abstraction and technology to re-direct or re-engineer them to post-capitalist ends. Also, there was an interest in the work of Nick Land and the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) of the 1990s and early 00s as an explicit 'accelerationism' (in fact, always in the back of my mind as an object of critique). I objected to both these trends, in different ways, and so wrote *Malign Velocities*, which was published in 2013. At that point I had expected Nick and Alex to produce a book-length statement of their ideas, which I would engage with. Due to the absence of this work, my book took the form of a critical historical reconstruction of various forms of accelerationism with only some brief notes and criticisms of the *Manifesto* and a more substantial discussion of Nick Land's work. 2014 we get *#Accelerate: the accelerationist reader*, a very different historical construction of accelerationism, largely positive, edited by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian; broad art world diffusion. 2015, the 'Xenofeminist Manifesto', by the Laboria Cuboniks collective attempts an accelerationist response to various feminist critiques (most pithily Hito Steyerl's accusation of 'dead white Ferrari envy' to accelerationists). In the same year, and now with the left publisher Verso, Srnicek and Williams's *Inventing the Future* appears. A footnote in that book announces that the term 'accelerationism' is now largely avoided, but not abdication from its principles.

Better to burn out than fade away? Another theoretical tendency been and gone before we rush joyously welcome or shuffle embarrassedly to the next? If even accelerationists no longer use the term then why bother to flog a dead horse? Those are ways to pose the future of accelerationism, but not mine. Instead, I want to recap and confirm my critiques of accelerationism before returning, yes, back to the future.

### Going faster miles an hour

One of the common events in debates about accelerationism is to claim the term has been radically misunderstood or is not appropriate. I have tried various typologies to trace the types and forms of accelerationism. Here I will keep it simple and conventional by offering summary critiques of right accelerationism (I might prefer reactionary accelerationism) and left accelerationism. My critiques will, in each case, focus on problems of the subject of accelerationism, the time of accelerationism, and the politics of accelerationism.

### Cthulhu Capitalism

It sometimes appears that right accelerationism is a camp of one, Nick Land. It is possible, however, to suggest a spectrum of various thinkers and associated movements that adopt a broadly pro-capitalist interpretation of accelerationism. This is often associated in its more reactionary forms with various 'new' (i.e. old) forms of hierarchy, usually supposedly based on cognitive ability but usually on transparent racism. In its reactionary forms accelerationism connects or continues a 'libertarian' (in the American sense) political philosophy, from Hayek, Ayn Rand, down to the current prophets of techno-libertarianism. In the case of Nick Land and the CCRU, at least in the 90s, this strand of right accelerationism emerged out of a pro-market 'anti-capitalism', derived from Fernand Braudel. The equivocation of this position meant it could easily turn from the traversal of capitalism by unleashed markets to a desire for a finally purified machinic capitalism that had no need for subjects. Land's own turn to the reactionary right has done nothing to not reinforce this suspicion.

In terms of the subject of accelerationism, as I have hinted, right accelerationism has a straightforward answer: capitalism. Shearing Marx's celebration of bourgeois dynamism from any revolutionary dialectic this current places capitalism as the accelerator par excellence, through hymning the 'productive forces'. The tricky thing then is if capitalism is doing the accelerating as what Marx once called an 'automatic subject', what's a poor accelerationist to do? This solution becomes a matter of will, but

the will to extinguish oneself into these dynamic forces. Therefore we have the stress on the cybernetic, the cyberpunk tropes, and all the other sci-fi references to integration into capital (as if we weren't already integrated). In a similar fashion to the Italian Futurists, will and vitality are invoked as forces of integration into the cold and dead 'machine' of capitalism. Unlike the Futurists this abdicates a directive capacity or, more exactly, it proposes dissolution into the process of making capitalism 'purer'. We have the subject as the one with the insight to will their own extinction, unlike the poor saps who cling to the meat; hence Nick Land as the figure of a cult of (non-) personality.

This vision has been critiqued from within accelerationism in Nick and Alex's work as the embrace of 'brain-dead onrush', a vision of speed not acceleration that merely replicates capitalist dynamism. The difficulty is that Land and the CCRU do not have a simple model of time as teleology. Instead, time for them is recursive and looping, a 'templex', which accounts for the fascination for time travel narratives, from *Terminator* to *Looper*. The teleology is, however, present in the supposition of a future realised state of acceleration, a purified 'capitalism' from which subversive agents (non-human) are sent back to the present. So, a disavowed teleology and also, in these loops of time, a rupturing of any modelling of time as emancipation to be replaced by the looping circuits of capitalist accumulation and consumption. Of course, as a right accelerationism, we should expect nothing less. That said, however, we should pay more attention to the right/reactionary elements of the disruption of time, certainly since whole swathes of 20<sup>th</sup> century thought have located a 'good' durational or disruptive time against a 'bad' linear or homogenous time. While this can function as a critique of capitalist time it can also operate as a metaphysics of temporal flux that serves to disable and disenable any scope for future directed action.

The political conclusion might be obvious: this is a politics that welcomes and celebrates capitalism, playing off its false capitalist promise of equality and levelling ('Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham', as Marx put it) against any left-wing claims to freedom and emancipation. We can add the reactionary tenor of this politics is already implicit in the celebration of the will to join with capitalism, which separates out subjects and allows stratification. That this later takes a racist, or hyper-racist, form in some reactionary accelerationisms follows already from this stratification and selection of 'accelerating' subjects. I also want to add, and return to, the fact that this can sharpen the metaphysical and politics stakes of a counter thought. This is not an argument for debate with these currents, which replicate and repeat many past reactionary tropes and movements, but rather for a recognition of how the door is opened to reaction through these 'complexifications' and 'fractures'. Right and reactionary accelerationism is revelatory of the Nietzschean irrationalism of will and temporal disruption that, in the name of a 'purified' capitalism, reveals and really desires the truly stratified forms capitalism always takes.

### Instruments of Darkness

Left accelerationism, instead, aims at a post-capitalist future. The image is not of a 'purified' capitalism per se, but a socialism or communism that will make full use of productive forces. It is another sci-fi vision, taking references not so much from *Terminator*, but from various 'utopian' forms of sci-fi. The claim here is that we can turn to these and past socialist moments of the embrace of technological possibilities to imagine a post-capitalist future in which technologies and abstraction will make possible a future of (red) plenty. My focus here is on the articulations by Nick and Alex in the 'Manifesto' and in *Inventing the Future*. While I won't have time to suggest all the differences between these two articulations, the second a more sober affair, I do want to examine what I consider to be common problems.

My arguments here have turned often on the problem of the subject, which can be read in at least two ways. In terms of human subjects we have the problem of who is doing the accelerating and who is being accelerated. Left accelerationists have a vision which is explicitly top-down, of the introduction of the notion of accelerationism which will then grip the masses. The view of accelerationism is at administrative one, which is strangely not that at home with politics. While there is more attempt to flesh out the subject in *Inventing the Future*, the subject remains divided between those struggling for hegemony, the accelerationists, and those to be 'reached', the 'acceleratable'.

The other sense of subject is the technology or abstractions to be accelerated. Here I think accelerationists have underestimated the embedding of capitalist relations of production in these forces of production. This is shown by the evasiveness around examples of acceleration and the tendency to offer only negative examples or to shy away from recommendations. My suggestion would be that an engagement with this embedding does not entail an anti-technological abandonment of 'all' technology (funnily enough objecting to certain forms of technology is often collapsed into an objection to 'all' technology). Instead, the analysis of this embedding would be crucial to any struggle to emancipate humans and nonhumans (after all Simondon suggests machines suffer alienation under capitalism).

In temporal terms the problem, especially in the 'Manifesto', is the lack of temporal specificity of when accelerationism takes place. The moment of accelerationism slides between something that needs to be engaged in as the condition of struggle, acceleration as the marker of struggle, and acceleration as the sign of a true revolutionary process. While such a brief statement is liable to these kinds of variations, and the answer could be all three, I would say the lack of specificity leaves the moment of acceleration a floating one. In this case it can be invoked at various points and in various ways, especially when detached from speed, to become the imprimatur of a 'true' or correct line or process. This is especially the case when the major target of these texts is the left and the failures of the left. The temporal index of acceleration is used to settle a debate with left tendencies and so this temporality is also left detached from critical engagement with capitalist forms of time.

This links to my concerns with the politics of left accelerationism. The focus on the left as target leaves the analysis ungrounded, as capitalism and the right recede into material to be used for accelerative processes. It seems if we get the correct line in that dwindling constituency that is the left everything will unfold from there. Certainly *Inventing the Future* tries to remedy this fault with a more detailed conjunctural analysis, but the major target remains the left. The constant in both texts, in different ways, is an invocation of ideas and the delivery of ideas, via hegemonic struggles, as central to the battle over the future. Again, I think this is not per se wrong, but the analysis seems to me often to leave hegemony as empty of content, reduced to a struggle of ideas or of power that is undertaken by different groups of intellectuals. The discussion is also light on previous uses of hegemony as a concept and practice and the various faults and failures of these past experiments.

### Accelerationism as Will and Representation

It seems to me that the common horizon of accelerationism lies in the notion of will, the conception of reality as site of fictions to be manipulated, and an obsession with settling accounts with the left. These modes of thought are obviously not restricted to accelerationism and, at such a broad level, run through many currents of theory and politics to varying degrees and in different forms. This is accelerationism as will and representation. The vision of will is what gives the Nietzschean form to accelerationism, a mode of thinking in which, in different ways, the nonhuman might be said to come first is supplemented with a necessary infusion of the human. For right accelerationism this will is both will to integration into capitalism and will to dominate those who would try to restrain this will. If Nietzsche might be said to be the primary reference for the right version we could suggest Sorel, or a decaffeinated Sorel, for the left version. Sorel, influential on Gramsci, developed an equivocal politics of will as mode of division and struggle. In left accelerationism this is not a humanist will, but a will vectored through platforms and think tanks, a will that is 'for' the left but which produces analysis as a matter of competing force and power. If the right have been successful it is due to their force and will, if we are to be successful we must match them.

In terms of representation it is hyperstition that is the key category for both forms of accelerationism. Hyperstition describes the ways in which fiction structures or produces reality. A common example is H. P. Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu Mythos', a fictional construct of alien beings who once ruled the earth and will again, which has become 'real' through its reproduction as a mythology. This kind of representation is what gives 'weight' to these intellectual or cultural interventions. On the right the fictions tend to be nihilistic deconstructions of selfhood, hence the appeal of Cthulhu, and nihilistic celebrations of the sublime power of capitalism, hence the appeal of Cthulhu. On the left the fictions have been more 'real', a tendency to appeal to past utopian moments of accelerationism (notably Project Cybersyn) that did not 'work' but contain potential to reactivate a new techno-politics. Across both an appeal to sci-fi and electronic dance music provides an aesthetic core of hyperstitional forms of acceleration. While we should obviously be sensitive to the power of fictions which structure the real, especially evident in the various financial instruments that stalk the world, fiction here risks dissolving reality into competing claims in which representation is, again, a matter of power and authority.

Finally, while critiques of the left are certainly necessary, there is a slippage that occurs in the fact that the left might have powerful political ideas but it certainly does not have much political power. Critique can serve to inflate this image of power and leave the right untouched. For right accelerationism it is obvious to target the left, which is dismissed as a moralistic constraint on the raw power of capitalism unleashed. This is a trope that dates back to Land's 90s work and that of the CCRU. It now, in Land's recent work, connects to the racist inflection of the new reactionaries (NRx) that this restraint also includes a refusal to consider forms of 'natural' hierarchy (i.e. racism). In terms of inflation, the definition of the left as a planetary cabal, the Cathedral, in charge of regimes that obviously, by any sensible measure, aren't left, serves as ideological justification for the 'rebel' or 'guerrilla' stance of NRx and reactionary accelerationism. This also accounts for how the right accelerationists adopt (and pervert) certain left political tropes and forms of organisation. While they make use of technology (memes, political trolling, etc.) the irony is these techniques often remain 'folk political', in terms of bottom-up insurgencies.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of left accelerationism matters have shifted considerably, at least in the case of Nick and Alex's work, from a striking critique of the left as 'folk politics' in the *Manifesto* to a more moderated critique in *Inventing the Future*, where folk politics comes to mean something like Gramscian common sense (why that category isn't used is an interesting question). What is interesting to me is how the left remains the target here. While this can be said to be obvious for a therapeutic intervention aimed at the left, if folk politics is a more general name for the condition of all politics why this restriction? Also, there doesn't seem to be much of an epistemological and political account about the position from which folk politics is identified and critiqued, or of a dialectical articulation of the possibilities in 'folk politics', if we were to accept this category. While recently folk politics has been considerably loosened or expanded, and hegemonic struggle has stepped to the fore as the counter-strategy, the concept of politics still remains to me in the mode of power politics, of competing fictions. Hegemony, itself a loose concept, leaves vague what is specific to accelerationism, except demands that cannot be met. This, finally, is neo-Kantian conception of politics.

### Reactionary Novelities

To return to a point I made earlier and my contention that the battle for the future is being fought now I want to remark on an absence: the failure, as far as I am aware, of accelerationism to engage explicitly with the reactionary and even fascist turn that is operating in the US and Europe, if not globally. This absence is surprising, in some ways. *Anti-Oedipus*, one of the Ur-texts of accelerationism, devoted considerable discussion to the analysis of fascism, including coining the concept of microfascism. Nick

Land and the CCRU also deployed this concept of fascism, even if to more dubious ends, and even Land's engagement with NRx might have been a signal to make these political movements objects of analysis. Again, I am not suggesting this failure belongs solely to accelerationism. The left, or what gets called 'leftbook', devotes much more time to the critique of the left than the right.

My particular concern with accelerationism, however, lies in the claim to the future and how this failure to engage with reactionary forces leaves unstated these other claims to the future unanswered. While certainly the extreme right is, by definition a 'reaction', it is also, as Badiou puts it, a 'reactionary novelty'. I take this to mean that while it reacts to emancipatory events, most importantly the French and Russian revolutions, the reactionary right and fascism also have a relative autonomy, their own reactive dynamism, and write their own futures. Therefore, we do not compete only with a nostalgic left and a blind idiot god neoliberalism, but also reactionary ideologies and projects that have their own 'utopias' (dystopias for the left). These reactionary ideologies are not only backward looking but, as we have seen, also engage in and with technology. There is, as Jeffrey Herf identified, a 'reactionary modernism'. This category, which for Herf included Ernst Jünger's aestheticized vision of technological violence, could obviously be extended to currents of NRx and right accelerationism. The utopia here is the armoured self, the cold entomologist, observing nihilism from without, while also participating in its movement. As Walter Benjamin said of the Italian Futurists, another set of candidates, this art for art's sake has reached the point at which 'it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order'.<sup>3</sup>

The élan of the Futurists, whose 'formulations deserve to be accepted by dialecticians', as Benjamin also wrote, is largely lacking in contemporary reactionary articulations. The reactionary forces do inhabit an obvious nostalgia, stealing tropes from the left about 'stable work' and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modernisation, but coupled, obviously, to the most retrograde forms of racism ('white workers') and the further dismantling of any remnants of that dispensation. The future is, here, the past. Yet, there is also an apocalyptic tone, especially as one edges-out towards the most reactionary and quasi-fascist forms of contemporary movements. In the face of capitalist crisis the future is not abandoned but re-imagined in the style of apocalyptic sci-fi. Here, as I've often remarked, the attraction is to an elitist model of division and elimination (those capable and resourceful enough to survive, the road warriors, and those left behind or disposable). This obviously includes a technological element and, as I noted, the reactionary right has proved a force capable of exploiting the capacities of the internet and social media for crowdsourced forms of persecution and harassment (from 'gamergate' to a friend in Croatia's report of 'naming-and-shaming' left-wing activists by social media in an effort to encourage violence against them or losing them employment).

Therefore, I see part of the material and ideological analysis of the current conjuncture to require an analysis of these 'futures'. This is not to credit them with more power than they have, but also to recognise their role in galvanising hegemonic struggles to shift things to the right. State an extreme position, get a reaction and then allow the 'official' forms of the right to shift towards the extreme as a gesture of moderation. Also, however, to recognise their 'substance', especially in drawing on a long tradition of reactionary thought (in shorthand, from de Maistre to Schmitt). So, the battle for the future is not simply an internal battle for the left, one to be resolved by the achievement of the 'correct line', but one facing a range of ideological opponents with a range of material resources. To be able to fight this battle is, I think, one of the crucial stakes of the present.

### **Conclusion: Practising a Weakness**

I want to draw some conclusions for the left out of these three points of critique I have posed: subject, temporality, and politics. In terms of subject the left has the answer of the proletariat. The class with nothing to lose but their chains, the class which is the source of labour that capitalism exploits, and so forms the universal class opposed to capitalism. Certainly we can say, which has always been the case, the proletariat appears as a *problem*. The collapse or decline of 'traditional' institutional and political forms of worker resistance (states, unions, parties) seems to leave a vacuum into which not only accelerationism steps. Currently left analysis seems to oscillate between the identification of a vanguard group of workers closest to the (Kantian) idea of the proletariat (cognitariat, surplus population, etc.) and a dispersion of the concept to include, nearly, everyone (99%, multitude). I think the purification of the proletariat as subject out of the empirical working class is part of the problem.<sup>4</sup> We are lacking, or forgetting, the need for class analysis that can grasp the overlapping and displacement of these strategies (think of the category of 'the retired' for example). While I am suggesting this is a task, I still think this is a central task to displace a politics of will that engages in a forcing not attentive to these realities.

Second, temporality. Here the left has a temporality of progress. While I myself have no doubt been equivocal on this, and still have much sympathy for Walter Benjamin's critique, this critique does not simply disable a notion of progress or, if you prefer, teleology. After all, even the dead will not be safe if the enemy wins. While *Inventing the Future* is staked on progress, this remains with utopian fiction as 'the embodiment of the hyperstitions of progress', which is to say in the register of willed fictions, even if these produce 'real' effects. Against this fictionalisation of progress, which risks reducing it to mere option, and against the pluralisation and dispersion of time into a churn of loops or micro-times, I have often recurred to Brecht's start with the bad new. This is a task of sorting, identifying, and strengthening those points of resistance in time that promise or develop toward a socialist or communist future (I should perhaps mention I am not that bothered whether we say socialist or communist and think that 'communist purity', in certain forms, can be problematically detached from reality).

Finally, to finish, in line with what I have said this is a politics that is geared to contesting the right, reactionary currents, and capitalism. No doubt this politics, which attempts a material grounding in our conjuncture, is also going to involve contests

amongst the left, but I see also the need to *target* the right. It sees politics not as a matter of will, but as a matter of necessity, working with the various dispersed and fractured struggles of the moment. This would be to abandon the neo-Kantian politics of the idea and demand for a politics of class struggle engaged with contemporary forces. In this I am saying nothing original and something that many here would say they have already said or would agree with. That is good. I do think, however, that if accelerationism has no future, fine. If it is to be abandoned by its adherents, fine. This does not mean, however, that certain of its habits of thought don't remain and in so far as I consider them pernicious need to be critiqued. After all accelerationism did not fall from the sky(net), but it fell on fertile ground already prepared in many intellectual and political currents and out of certain continuities, especially from thinking in the 90s. That is why this is one more, or more last, effort to make a critique. Not in the hope or regret that this will finish things, but as a means to start again.

1 The most substantial critiques of accelerationism have come from Nina Power, Anthony Galluzzo, David Cunningham, and Harrison Fluss.

2 See Mike Davis 'A Week in the Death of Alfred Olongo', Los Angeles Review of Books, October 6, 2016: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/week-death-alfred-olongo/>

3 <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

4 See "The Proletariat is Missing": Representations of the Proletariat in Cinema, Interview with Ramin Alaei of *Culture Today* Magazine (Iran): [https://www.academia.edu/28620075/\\_The\\_Proletariat\\_is\\_Missing\\_Representations\\_of\\_the\\_Proletariat\\_in\\_Cinema\\_Interview\\_with\\_Ramin\\_Alaei\\_of\\_Culture\\_Today](https://www.academia.edu/28620075/_The_Proletariat_is_Missing_Representations_of_the_Proletariat_in_Cinema_Interview_with_Ramin_Alaei_of_Culture_Today)

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